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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001670

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/23/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: NEW CAMOUFLAGE FOR SLEIMAN

REF: BEIRUT 1659

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Amal (and by extension, Syria) continues to appear to be seeking a presidential nomination for Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman. Amal claims not to be pushing its own candidate, insisting the ball is now in the hands of the Christian leaders and the Patriarch. Once they choose one or even several candidates, Speaker Berri says, he will convene parliament to vote. This strikes us, however, as a thinly veiled plan to give added weight to Sleiman's nomination. As for the prime ministership, Amal may be setting Saad Hariri up to become PM now with an eye toward taking away Hariri's parliamentary majority in 2009 elections. End summary.

LEBANON WILL HAVE A NEW PRESIDENT BY NOVEMBER 23

¶2. (C) Pol/Econ Chief and Senior FSN Political Advisor met with Ali Hamdan, advisor to Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, on October 24. An optimistic Hamdan, referring to ongoing meetings between Christian leaders and Patriarch Sfeir, said he believed things were moving in the right direction. Once they agree on a candidate or candidates and then get the Patriarch's blessing, Berri will convene parliament to hold a vote, he said, confirming that this could happen before the scheduled November 12 session if the Christians agree on candidates sooner. "Book your flight" Hamdan told Pol/Econ Chief, who had asked jokingly whether Lebanon would have a new president by November 23 so she could take a planned a Thanksgiving vacation.

¶3. (C) Hamdan said Amal was no longer in the game of pushing candidates; it was now in the hands of the Christians, he said, adding that Berri favorite Jean Obeid was definitely out of the running. Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun and March 14 preferred candidate Nassib Lahoud would both be thrown out as the two extreme candidates. Hamdan refrained from speculating further on which candidates' names would appear before the Patriarch.

AND THE WINNER IS...

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¶4. (C) About halfway through the hour-long conversation, however, Hamdan asked whether we thought Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman would have a problem securing a constitutional amendment if he had the Patriarch's blessing. Noting PM Siniora's possible objections, Hamdan asked whether Siniora would dare to defy the Patriarch on this.

¶5. (C) Pol/Econ Chief, noting that Berri and Hariri had met several times since the latter's return to Lebanon, asked whether Amal had a name in mind for prime minister. This is up to the Sunnis, Hamdan replied; the Christians choose the president, and the Sunnis choose the prime minister.

Acknowledging that the next prime minister would have to address critical issues such as implementation of UNSCR 1701 (Note: he omitted 1559, though we were quick to remind him), the new electoral law, Hizballah's arms, etc., Hamdan would not say whether these had to be part of a package deal in choosing the president, or even whether Hariri and Berri had discussed these issues.

COMMENT

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¶6. (C) This new "leave it to the Christians" to decide approach strikes us as too gratuitous and late in coming to be a completely altruistic change of heart. Instead, knowing the wily Berri always has something up his sleeve, we suspect this is just another measure to build pressure (with the Patriarch as unwitting pawn this time) to make a Sleiman presidency a fait accompli. With Sleiman presented as the one man who can both save the country and unite the Christians, the worried Patriarch would be hard-pressed to

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object. Furthermore, no Lebanese leader would dare go against the Patriarch's recommendation, certainly not any of the non-Christian March 14 leaders like Walid Jumblatt (Druse) or Saad Hariri (Sunni). Even Aoun would have no choice but to accept the Patriarch's decision, thus relieving March 8 of the dirty job of having to tell Aoun he won't be president. And while PM Siniora might object, he would find himself, as Hamdan correctly points out, in a very difficult position indeed if he were seen as the only one blocking a solution to the crisis over the presidency. A serious obstacle, however, is Patriarch Sfeir's own reservations about Sleiman, repeated in unusually clear terms to the Ambassador during a 10/24 meeting (to be reported septel).

¶7. (C) Hariri has met three times with Berri in the few days he has been back in Lebanon. We doubt they are merely discussing presidential candidates. Although we are only speculating, it seems likely Berri is seeking Hariri's assurances that issues such as UNSCR 1559 won't be on the next government's agenda in return for March 8's support to make him the next prime minister. After that, the opposition's next steps, presumably, would be to try to weaken March 14 before the spring 2009 parliamentary elections in hopes of obtaining the majority then. With 1559 gone, Hizballah's arms would remain untouched in the interim. Hariri's father Rafiq, of course, is widely seen as having been murdered because of his behind-the-scenes promotion of ¶1559. We see Saad on 10/27 and will see whether, as we suspect, he is more firm on 1559 than Berri may wish.

FELTMAN